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ABSTRACT

Eight principles that have been used to reach excellence in business and industry and ways that schools can apply those principles are described. The principles, identified by Thomas J. Peters and Robert N. Waterman, Jr. in "In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies" are: (1) a bias for action (not waiting for extensive analysis before implementing change); (2) closeness to the customer (listening to customers' advice and responding to requests); (3) autonomy and entrepreneurship (rewarding self-initiative); (4) productivity through people (treating employees as adults and providing rewards for success); (5) hands-on, value-driven (selecting and emphasizing a few key values); (6) stick to the knitting (concentrating on those things the company is experienced with and does well); (7) simple form, lean staff (keeping central office staff to a minimum); and (8) simultaneous loose-tight properties (encouraging local-level decisionmaking while retaining central monitoring). A matrix is presented which applies the eight principles to the operational style of the school superintendent, school board, principal, teacher, and employment and training program staff. It is recommended that board members, administrators, and other staff review the matrix and consider ways to apply the principles to their own situations. (DC)

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Striving for Excellence: Applications of Successful Business Principles. Ideas for Action in Education and Work.

by

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November 1983

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Striving for Excellence: Applications of Successful Business Principles

Why the Concern?

According to some popular critics of public secondary education, millions of American youth are being denied a quality education and are willing to settle for mediocrity. These analysts claim the effects of secondary education are disasterous for the individual as well as for our nation as a whole.

After reading A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform (National Commission on Excellence in Education), Action for Excellence (Task Force on Education for Economic Growth), and High School: A Report on American Secondary Education (Carnegie Foundation 1983), one could easily become depressed about the state of public education in our country. However, many educators, school board members and parents have started to use these reports as a stimulus to examine their local schools and determine what steps are needed to achieve excellence.

Whatever the initial reaction, most educators readily admit there is certainly room for improvement at both the classroom level and the policy making level. Constructive solutions have been generated from the growing literature on effective schools research over the past decade and are now being tried out in schools throughout the country.

While educational reform has become a national issue this year, there has been a parallel stir in the business world. Concerns about productivity, economic development and the "competitive edge" are common topics in corporate boardrooms and at bargaining tables alike. This issue of Ideas for Action highlights principles that have been used to reach excellence in business and industry; further, it describes some ways schools and training agencies are currently applying or might apply these same principles of excellence to their own settings.

Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies

Ongoing discussions with business people in the Northwest indicate most employers are constantly searching for ways to improve their performance. The national best seller In Search of Excellence: Lessons From America's Best-Run Companies by Thomas J. Peters and Robert N. Waterman, Jr. is regarded by many to be a classic work on excellence in the business

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world. We believe principles of excellence resulting from Peters and Waterman's three-year study of 62 of America's best-run companies provide some useful insights for achieving excellence in education as well. However, cautions are in order. We do not view the school as a factory. The bottom line profit motive of the private sector is not applicable to public education. And unlike corporations, public education lacks the freedom to determine what products to produce or to select its customers (students).

Some of the principles that Peters and Waterman derived from studying large corporations may not apply to small school districts just as they may not apply to small businesses. Certain principles may be far more important to some individuals than to others. Indeed, Peters himself in a recent interview with U.S. News and World Report, expressed the belief that a bias for action, closeness to the customer and high productivity through people, (see definitions that follow) are the most important qualities for corporate success.

Nevertheless, the principles developed by Peters and Waterman warrant serious consideration and suggest some exciting implications for America's schools, particularly when we know that graduates will soon be entering the workplace where these principles may be applied. This issue of Ideas for Action presents a matrix that reflects applications of the eight principles of excellence in business to three "levels" of a public school system and to employment and training programs.

The Eight Principles

In Search of Excellence delineates eight principles: (1) A Bias for Action, (2) Close to the Customer, (3) Autonomy and Entrepreneurship, (4) Productivity Through People, (5) Hands-on, Value-Driven, (6) Stick to the Knitting, (7) Simple Form, Lean Staff, and (8) Simultaneous Loose-Tight Properties. Each of these is discussed and applied to various educational settings, through examples in the excellence matrix.

A Bias for Action. The more successful companies decide on new directions very quickly without waiting for extensive analysis of issues before moving. One business establishment uses the motto, "ready, fire, aim"--a maxim implying their willingness to take action and then refine actions as they proceed. Yet this is often not the case in educational settings. As one Northwest assistant superintendent said, "We study things to death in education." He went on to stress the value of acting on first approximations rather than waiting until an ideal program has been found to solve problems.

Close to the Customer. Listening to customers' advice and responding to changing customer requests is needed for success in business as well as in education. Educators serve two major customers--students and the public. We need to remain responsive to both. Responsiveness includes recognizing their needs and providing services that meet those needs. Teachers tell us that good schools are student oriented.

Autonomy and Entrepreneurship. Personal leadership and self-initiative are recognized and rewarded in successful companies. Yet in education, teachers are rewarded as team players while their individual talents and contributions are often underplayed. Private and proprietary schools have been increasing in number. These schools provide financial and other rewards for the risks taken in starting and successfully operating private ventures. Talk of vouchers in education and training may result in still further expansion of private schools.

Productivity Through People. Peters and Waterman suggest increased productivity can occur by treating employees as adults and providing individual and group rewards for success. National reports criticizing American secondary education, such as A Nation at Risk, strongly recommend identifying and rewarding quality teachers. The superintendent of the Houston Public Schools has recently stated the district's intention to pay their best teacher $50,000 a year by 1990. Good administrators in both corporations and schools avoid a we/they labor attitude.

Hands-On, Value-Driven. Successful executives select a few key values and stress those values in all aspects of business. For example, "teamwork" is not only an advertising slogan for Delta Airlines but is emphasized in the company's policies and day-to-day operations. Noticeable changes can occur in a school when a principal and teachers agree on one or two goals for the year and work toward achieving those goals. Researchers studying effective schooling issues stress the importance of "alignment" which means identifying goals, implementing activities related to those goals and continuously evaluating to see if the goals are being met. Effective schooling research strongly advocates educational leaders establishing a focus for their schools.

Stick to the Knitting. Successful companies, according to Peters and Waterman, concentrate on those things they are experienced with and do well. They are reluctant to enter unrelated fields in which they have no experience or knowledge. In education we need to constantly remind ourselves of the business we are in. Frequently, we have tried to respond to the multiple demands of the public only to find that we are not accomplishing the task at hand--educating young people. In the past year, many schools and communities have agreed to focus on academic excellence and to abandon other peripheral programs such as after-school recreational activities. The "time on task" concept as an effective schooling practice is an example of helping teachers stick to the business at hand, through increased academic engaged time and reduced noninstructional time.

Simple Form, Lean Staff. Large corporations in the 1980s are finding ways to keep the number of central office staff to a minimum. Reduced school budgets and community pressure are forcing many school districts to do likewise. Central office staff in large districts are often being asked to absorb responsibilities of departing colleagues whose positions are not being replaced. Fewer staff specialists are being hired. Newer management styles of some high technology firms are calling for less hierarchy, greater staff accessibility to executives, and less need for middle management personnel. Many school districts are beginning to follow suit. A similar trend can be found in implementation of the new Job Training Partnership Act where federal guidelines require that administrative costs be kept to a minimum.

Simultaneous Loose-Tight Properties. Encouraging decision making at the local level while retaining central monitoring of a few key factors is the final success principle discussed by Peters and Waterman. An example of this principle in business is IBM top management knowing within hours when the company has lost a customer. While such information is gathered companywide, other IBM functions are highly decentralized. A recent example of this principle in education is the way school improvement is handled in the Seattle Public Schools. The superintendent and staff have identified approximately a dozen areas for program improvement; individual schools are free to select any of these problems to address as local situations dictate.

The Excellence Matrix

The matrix that follows identifies the eight principles of excellence identified by Peters and Waterman at the top of each column. Horizontal strands apply the principle to the operational style of a school superintendent and school board, local school principal, classroom teacher and employment and training program staff. The examples were drawn from discussions held individually with representatives of these groups and a session held with eight teachers and principals to review and discuss the principles of excellence. Additionally, NWREL's experience in working with school districts and employment and training programs served as a resource.

The bottom row of the matrix is left blank so individuals might note how each principle applies to their own situation or setting. Individuals may not find corresponding applications for each principle. However, it is hoped that educators and others will be able to identify specific ways these eight principles might help in achieving excellence in the school and workplace.

Sample Applications of Successful Business Principles

	The Principle	Bias for Action	Close to the Customer	Autonomy and Entrepreneurship	Productivity Through People	Hands-On, Value-Driven	Stick to the Knitting	Simple Form, Lean Staff	Loose-Tight Properties
BUSINESS		*Try out many innovations and adjust along the way rather than spending too much time analyzing issues*	*Keep the customer in mind, not just costs and profits*	*Encourage leadership and self initiative*	*Achieve productivity by treating employees as adults and rewarding successful performance*	*Identify and continuously stress a few basic values*	*Concentrate on those things your company is experienced with and does best*	*Keep the central office staff to a minimum*	*Centralize on a few cost values and provide maximum decision making at the local level*
	Example from Business	*Try out a new product without lengthy market research*	*Listen to customer's advice and respond to changing consumer requests*	*Turn a new invention over to a 'champion' who makes sure the idea succeeds*	*Reward outstanding individual and group performance*	*Get everyone involved and keep things simple is one company's motto*	*Continue working in the field where you are expert; avoid buying out companies in fields where you have no experience*	*One company with 54,000 employees makes do with fewer than 100 at corporate headquarters*	*Give autonomy to line managers but demand good results*
EDUCATION	School Board and Superintendent	Encourage experimentation and modify programs based on continuous evaluation	Keep the needs of students as a guiding principle	Encourage local principals and other staff to develop and carry out building-level plans	Recognize productive staff through pay and nonfinancial incentives	Select a few key values to guide the district such as the importance of parent input in program planning	Identify key goals and stick to them	Determine what size staff is essential to operate the central office	Give as much autonomy as possible to individual schools while centralizing transportation and other services
	School Principal	Encourage action research among teachers; support faculty who want to visit exemplary programs	Maintain communication with parents and citizen groups; provide feedback on how suggestions have been used	Give autonomy to teachers to carry out their jobs consistent with school priorities	Use nonfinancial rewards for productive teachers and students	Help school staff agree to adopt consistent standards for student performance in priority areas	Keep classroom distractions to a minimum; give instructional programs top priority	Provide teachers with immediate access to the principal	Give department chairpersons more involvement in selecting staff and deciding on instructional materials and equipment
	Classroom Teacher	Keep what works well for students and modify less successful approaches	Personalize instruction to meet the needs of individual students	Encourage students to show initiative in planning and carrying out learning and leadership activities	Give students responsibility for fire drills, lunch counts, tutoring, etc.	Identify and enforce a few basic classroom management principles	Emphasize a few themes in a history class and develop them in depth	Arrange for volunteers to help with paperwork so more time can be given to instruction	Give students freedom to operate within accountability guidelines set by the teacher and school
JTPA	Employment and Training Program (Job Training Partnership Act)	Explore new approaches to job exploration and career assessment	Provide immediate feedback on vocational aptitude assessment	Use self-directed approach as a job search strategy	Provide peer support through job clubs for adults seeking employment	Provide consistent feedback on appropriate work behavior	Evaluate student success on a job with follow through to employers	Keep paperwork to a minimum	Encourage local PICs to exercise wide latitude in determining local needs while satisfying state JTPA guidelines
	My Situation								

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Where To Go From Here

Applying the Principles to Your Own Situation

Over 75 state and national reports produced within the past two years criticize public education in America. Most of these include recommendations for achieving excellence. As might be expected, it is not uncommon for recommendations from one report to contradict those from another. Rather than adopting any one set of recommendations, it may be more prudent to consider a broader framework for excellence such as the eight principles discussed in this issue of Ideas for Action.

As a board member, administrator or staff person, we suggest that you review the excellence matrix and think of examples that might fit your own setting. Consider various ways you may want to apply your insights. One superintendent has already used these principles in designing staff inservice for the school year. Other educators may want to use principles of excellence in a self-report form to determine how teachers and other staff feel about a district or school. A discrepancy check can be used to determine variations in perceptions of students, staff and the community. The school board and staff can then select one or two principles to focus on for improvement over the year.

Sharing Results

We hope you will spend some time developing examples of how principles of excellence apply to your own setting and ways that you might implement them. When you do, please send us your ideas or pick up the telephone and let us know about your efforts. We will compile your ideas and share them with others responding. If interest is sufficient, a workshop on this topic will be scheduled providing a forum for you to share your ideas in person with colleagues and other interested people in business and industry.
Several school districts have already requested quantities of this report to share with the school board and school staff. If you need multiple copies, please feel free to reproduce this issue.

Acknowledgements

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Editor's Note

IDEAS FOR ACTION IN EDUCATION AND WORK synthesize information from research and practice on topics of current interest. Other titles in the series include:

Removing Barriers to CETA/School Collaboration (out of print)

Improving Learning in the Workplace

Teaching Independent Living Skills to Youth

Volunteering...Pathway to Paid Employment

Striving for Excellence: Middle Schoolers Study "Work"

Learning Responsibility: The Importance of the Home, School and Workplace

Northwesterners Out of Work: The Human Costs of Unemployment

Northwesterners Out of Work: The Effects of Job Dislocation

Choices for Migrant Youth

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